Issues in Digitization:
Final Report
To the North Carolina State Historical Records Advisory Board (SHRAB) and to
the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)

Digitization, the process by which information is made computer compatible, carries great promise for information managers, among them archivists, librarians, and registers of deeds. Digitization also offers a great many challenges.

Under the terms of a 1999 grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to the North Carolina State Historical Records Advisory Board (SHRAB), Kevin Cherry, consultant for special collections in the State Library of North Carolina and project director of the North Carolina ECHO Project, was asked to participate in a public access cable television call-in show (which has subsequently been rebroadcast several times) on "Issues in Digitization," telecast October 23, 2001, and a day-long statewide conference on records, *Charting Our Future*, held on November 2, 2000, and to share his understanding of digitization issues. Conclusions reached during the television program and conference were compatible with some of the major trends identified by Cherry during his several years working with the federal grant-funded North Carolina ECHO, "Exploring Cultural Heritage Online," the statewide access to special collections and digitization project managed by the State Library of North Carolina.

Finding 1. Expectations High

Among the general population expectations for the possibilities of computer-based information are sometimes very unrealistic. Calls to the public access television show and questions from participants during the day-long conference reflected this fact. Led by popular culture to believe that all types of information can be found by simply typing the right combination of words into an Internet search box, users of the state's archives, libraries, and records centers regularly ask the custodians of the state's memory "How can I see this on my desktop at home?" and "When will it *all* be online?" There is a growing chorus of discontent among some of the most avid users of the state's research centers, and much of this discontent flows from a misunderstanding concerning what is involved in a digitization effort on the grand scale, an effort that in addition to holding huge numbers of images must be sustained for extended periods of time and be interoperable with other library and archive information management systems. It is not among users alone that this misunderstanding exists. There seems to be a belief among some managers (ones removed from the technical and day-to-day concerns of their operations) that digitization will, through automation, save the institution labor and space, and thus money. A cursory investigation and extensive anecdotal evidence seem to suggest that, at least in the early stages of this digital revolution, this is not yet the case.

Finding 2. Digitization Builds Upon Traditional Activities

Digitization is not currently recognized as a preservation activity, but as an access activity. It will more than likely remain simply a set of procedures aimed at providing greater access to materials until that time in which a series of processes and storage media are developed that will equal the longevity and ease of use of microfilm. Until that point is reached, the original analog copy must still be preserved. And even then, those future stewards of the past may still wish to maintain the original records for their artifactual value. This means that all traditional preservation measures must still be employed. Far from digitization requiring less arrangement and description of originals, in most instances it requires much more arranging, indexing, and cataloging. Where once the archivist may have been satisfied with folder lists, giving users the responsibility of thumbing through the pages found inside, the archivist when digitizing that folder must have control over *each* of the pages within, because each page will be individually scanned